

“Presbyterian history 101: The Church Union Debate”

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Text: 1 Corinthians 3: 1 - 9

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In September 1902, 3 clergy were appointed to attend the national Methodist Conference meeting to bear greetings to our Methodist brothers and sisters. It was an annual formality. However, one of those delegates – Principal William Patrick of Manitoba College – took his initiative to suggest to the Methodists that perhaps it was high time for our two denominations to consider an “organic union”. The Methodists were so moved by the idea that they instantly approved the establishment of a committee to speak to the Presbyterian Church about forming a united Protestant denomination. That impromptu comment led to the formation of the United Church in Canada in 1925... to 47 years of unsettledness for the Presbyterian Church. Nothing has had greater impact on our history.

There was much to promote the idea of union. Western Canada was growing quickly. In every small community the Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists were all trying to organize small congregations. Often these churches struggled since they did not have sufficient members to be financially secure. So many people thought that one, common Protestant mission effort in the West would be so practical. It was a time when church leaders were very progressive socially. The “Social Gospel” movement was in full swing, with many Presbyterian and Methodist proponents. Social Gospel people believed that the very fabric of society could be shaped by the Church. To them, it was socially progressive to create one denomination. The Unionists also pointed to Jesus’ prayer that His followers “would all be one” (John 17:21). A union of Christians was seen as a desirable thing in the eyes of faith. So out of theory, out of practicality, out of the social movement of the day, out of faithfulness the dream of union grew. By 1904 the joint union committee of Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Methodists agreed on a name: “The United Church in Canada”. The Methodists and Congregationalists were ready to join... but not us.

It was an immense topic of debate within the Presbyterian Church. The issue split congregations and families. The anti union movement was a movement of the laypeople of our church – not so much the clergy. George Brown, the editor of the Toronto Globe newspaper – and a Presbyterian elder – published many front page anti-union editorials. Ministers who preached sermons for or against union would see parishioners get up and leave in the middle of the service. But even though it was so contentious, we (the on-going Presbyterian Church) have to acknowledge that for 15 years successive General Assemblies re-affirmed union. Over that period three votes were held for the total membership of our denomination, and each time about 2/3’s of Presbyterians voted for union. It really was the will of The Presbyterian Church in Canada to vote itself out of existence. By 1916 it was a foregone conclusion. The next 9 years were about preparing for schism. In the Prairies the feelings ran very strongly for

union. By 1923 (2 years before union) there were already 800 self-declared “union congregations” in Saskatchewan and Alberta! The west was going with union, no matter what.

One of my history books states, “Full scale, bitter and unrelenting war was unleashed with the pronouncements of the 1923 General Assembly”: the whole of The Presbyterian Church in Canada was going into union (dissenters could vote themselves out later), the denomination would legally cease to exist, the name “The Presbyterian Church in Canada” would legally disappear. The assets of the church would all go to the United Church: colleges, endowments, property. It was all to happen by an act of Parliament in 1924. But at the last minute, however, the Senate changed the Act to allow individual congregations to opt out of union before it happened, based on a simple majority vote, and some assets would be retained by the continuing Presbyterians.

So the difficult now became far more difficult. Knox Church Calgary voted strongly in favour of becoming United. The dissenters left and formed a new Knox Presbyterian Church. Some votes were painfully close. Chalmers in Toronto voted 458 to 454 to stay Presbyterian. There were many fights over church buildings. Most provincial governments established roving commissions to settle the disputes. You can just imagine the raw tensions around congregations like this. St. Andrew’s Calgary vote overwhelmingly to remain with “the continuing Presbyterian Church.” At that point in the meeting, the minister, Rev. McKenzie, declared himself to be a unionist, and tendered his resignation from the congregation effective the day the United Church was formed. So St. Andrew’s found itself without a minister, like many congregations after union. In 1926 we were still short 140 ministers to serve the continuing Presbyterian congregations.

We were the second largest Protestant denomination in Canada before union, with 5,300 congregations. Of them 784 chose not to enter the union. We were left with 100 congregations in the four western provinces. Calgary had 10 Presbyterian congregations. After union there were only three – of which Grace and St. Andrew’s were the only long term survivors. While our denomination retained Knox College and Presbyterian College and some endowed money, we were a denomination that operated in debt until after the second war – so much funding had been lost.

Then there were issues of the on-going use of our name. Despite the federal legislation that declared “The Presbyterian Church in Canada” having ceased to exist, there were many congregations continuing to use this name. The United Church tried legal action to get us to stop. A federal government committee met with the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church to hear our plea to retain our name. The United Church protested this... but the Prime Minister of the day was MacKenzie King: an on-going Presbyterian. Long legal action was needed to regain our name, and that took until 1939. 14 years.

When you take a large denomination and divide it on the basis of ideals, principles and articles of faith, you go through a process of rapid natural selection that leaves a strong imprint that it is still easily visible for generations. For example, socially progressive Presbyterians were generally in favour of union. The new United Church of Canada, as a consequence, began life as socially liberal and politically engaged. But the opposite became instantly true for us. The Presbyterian Church in Canada instantly became a denomination with less passion for justice issues. We also instantly became a much more traditionalist denomination....because, more than anything else, that is what kept us “continuing Presbyterians” out of the United Church. Most Presbyterians did not want to give up their identity.

“I am for the Presbyterian Church!” “I am for the United Church!” Those were the chants, and our Scripture reading helps us see that “there is nothing new under the sun.” About 20 years after Jesus’ resurrection the fledgling church in Corinth was enduring the same kinds of divisions. “I belong to Paul!”, “I belong to Apollos!” The division was over a difference in teaching between the two missionaries. Paul, who founded the congregation, taught them Christian basics. We read, “You were infants in Christ, so I fed you milk and not solid food. You weren’t ready for solid food. And this divisive behaviour shows that you still aren’t ready for solid food!” Apollos was another early Christian missionary. We know next to nothing about him. But Paul says here, “I planted and Apollos watered”, which implies Apollos visited the Corinthian Church sometime after Paul. Apollos (a travelling Christian preacher and teacher) built on the fundamentals left behind by Paul. It was on this basis that the divisions in the church were formed. Some viewed Paul as the congregation’s founder, and thus the one to follow. Others appreciated how Apollos expanded their understanding of the Christian faith and so wanted to follow him. Paul responded to this situation with some insights that were applicable to the church union debate and still applicable today. Whether it is me or Apollos, he wrote, we both serve the same Lord—Jesus Christ—and we have a common purpose: building up the church. We are both servants of the same Lord. It’s an expression of unity under God. But then Paul acknowledged diversity. Paul wrote, “What then is Apollos? What then is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each.” This verse suggests that while Paul and Apollos had a common master and a common mission, they could have different roles. In an analogy Paul wrote, “I planted (the seed of faith), and Apollos watered (helping that seed).” The Christians of Corinth needed both these people as they grew together as a new faith community and grew into God.

Unity in Christ. Unity in mission. Diversity in role. This is the tension denominations live with. The Reformation prompted a division so great that we could not find any unity in Christ between the branches of the reforming churches (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Mennonite) and the Roman Catholic Church. We lived with those animosities for centuries. And we lived for decades with an animosity towards the United Church. Fortunately the 20th century has seen the melting of hard and fast positions between denominations in Canada. Today we pretty easily acknowledge that we have a common Lord

and a common mission. We also acknowledge our common challenge: the side-lining of the Church by Canadian society.

Today we are here because Presbyterians 100 years ago fought to remain outside the United Church. But to what end? What is our role as a distinct Christian denomination? I hope this series on our history has helped you appreciate how dramatically we have changed over the past 200 years. But in summary, the changes have been mostly about getting rid of what has not been helpful, and I for one am thankful for all of that! But the challenge for us as a denomination today is to imagine what our role is, moving forward into our future. How do we uniquely contribute to the mission of God? How do we want to be faithful? What would we ask God to bless? What can we, as the “ongoing Presbyterian Church”, contribute distinctly to the mission of God? This, I think, is our denomination’s biggest challenge for the 21st century. What are we going to do with this existence we fought so hard to retain?

But here is the good news that we find tucked away in Paul’s criticism and correction of the church in Corinth: “God brings the growth” he wrote. It may be that Paul planted and Apollos watered, but God gives the growth. We may not know yet if The Presbyterian Church in Canada is in the “planting” or “watering” business, whatever that metaphor may mean for us today. But the mission of God hasn’t changed...and God’s desire to see the church thrive as one of God’s means for pursuing that mission hasn’t changed. So in this assurance we have hope. May this assurance move us beyond our past and pursue our future.